

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Monuments to Veterinary Medicine, Part IV

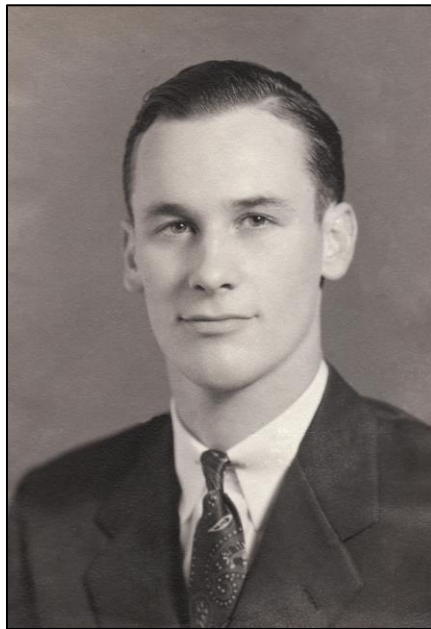
Editor's Note: Of the men whose stories are abstracted here, only one remains alive (Dr. Waple). Dr. Gumaer died in 2008 at age 88; Dr. Proctor in 2009 at age 91; Dr. Povar in 2013 at age 93; and Dr. Bent in 2012 at 97. I dedicate this story to their memories.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
August 15, 2014

Over 600 World War II veterans die each day. Of the over 16 million who served from the US alone, fewer than 10% remain. In many cases, the careers of the veterinarians who were engaged in that war, either as food inspectors in this country or abroad, as researchers or intelligence officers, or even in combat, were interrupted, sometimes substantially. War scars and wounds, often not physical, were seldom discussed except perhaps in their later years.

In this fourth part in the series, I summarize first-person interviews with veterinarians who served in one way or another in World War II. Their stories help represent different ways in which the war had an impact on veterinary medicine and, conversely, how veterinary had an impact on the war effort.

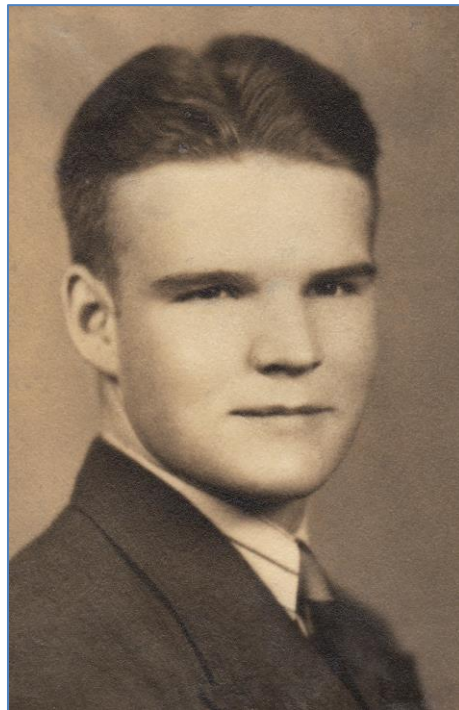


Dr. Kenneth I. Gumaer, 1943, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Some veterinarians saw combat. **Drs. Kenneth Gumaer** and Marshall Waple '43 were two of a very select group of veterinarians engaged in the liberation of Burma from the Japanese in 1943-44. They were responsible for transporting shiploads of mules from the port in New Orleans to Calcutta where they traveled by rail to a base in northeastern India called Deogarh. From there, they became part of the famous "Merrill's Marauders" unit that crossed the Ledo Trail into central Burma and eventually recaptured the major airbase at Myitkyina from the Japanese.

The dangers of the mission are hard to comprehend. Despite knowing Dr. Gumaer well for many years, and having multiple conversations with him about the China-Burma-India Theater, I still read extensively on the topic to help me understand the story.

The drama didn't all unfold in Asia, either. Dr. Gumaer's ship loaded with mules was torpedoed within days of leaving New Orleans—it was salvaged and continued across the Atlantic in heavy seas. Dr. Waple's ship made it safely across the Atlantic and through the Suez Canal, only to be struck by U-boat's torpedoes off the coast of India. The ship was lost and all of the precious cargo of mules perished. In Dr. Waple's words, "We lost our asses off the coast of India."



Dr. D.L. Proctor, 1944, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

The five-month, 750-mile trek, through the Burmese jungle and across the treacherous Kumon mountain range, while battling the enemy, hunger and disease represented some of the most challenging assignments of the war. Following the recapture of the airfield on May 17, 1944, Dr. Gumaer continued into China with General Chiang Kai-shek's forces, where he developed the cutaneous form of anthrax and was successfully treated with an early form of aqueous

penicillin.

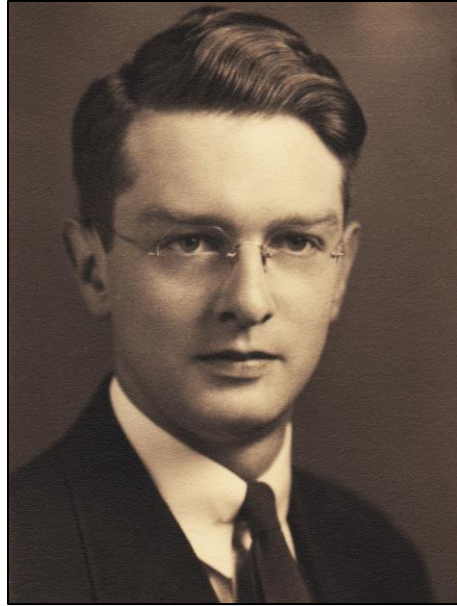
Dr. D.L. Proctor was also engaged in the China-India-Burma war, but his responsibilities for preparing horses and mules for service in Burma, rather than participating directly on the front lines.



Dr. Morris L. Povar, 1944, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Following their last veterinary examination at Cornell in May 1944, **Dr. Morris Povar** and his male classmates were taken overnight in a darkened train to Fort Dix Army Base in New Jersey, where they were commissioned as 1st Lieutenants while awaiting their war assignments. Because of his background experience in microbiology and familiarity with poultry, Dr. Povar was assigned to a poultry diagnostic laboratory in Vineland, New Jersey, that was operated by Rutgers University. There he was trained in experimental techniques and vaccine development, and then transferred to a poultry facility near Berkeley, California, where he spent the duration of the war developing vaccines designed to protect American agriculture from the anticipated threat of biological attack.

Dr. Clarence Bent graduated in 1939, only months before Britain and the rest of the Commonwealth entered the European conflict. As in WWI when Canadian veterinarians were engaged well before their American colleagues—in that case, it was 1914—US veterinarians who graduated before the attack on Pearl Harbor may have felt that it was only time before they would also become engaged in the war effort.



Dr. Clarence F. Bent, 1939, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Dr. Bent's first employment after graduation was at the Springfield hospital of the MSPCA Angell, one of the most progressive small animal hospitals in the country at the time. Fortified with self-confidence from that experience, he established his own veterinary practice in Nashua, New Hampshire. However, in the shadow of the December 1941 attack on the Pacific fleet, Bent was deployed as a commissioned officer of the US Army Veterinary Corps. He was stationed initially in Massachusetts as a food inspector, and later sent to Papua New Guinea and the Philippines where he served for the final two years of the war. When I asked him what it was like serving in the Pacific theatre, his single-word answer was "hot!"

Like so many others, Dr. Bent had to close his veterinary clinic, returning four years later to pick up the pieces and start again.

KEYWORDS:

Oral History
Kenneth I. Gumaer
D.L. Proctor
Morris Povar
Clarence Bent
Marshall Waple
Merrill's Marauders
China-Burma-India
History of Veterinary Medicine
World War II

TOPIC:

Oral History

LEADING QUESTION:

How did veterinarians serve in World War II?

META-SUMMARY:

A story about the different roles that veterinarians played in World War II.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.